

# **The Assembly's Early History in Richmond, VA (1)**

## **The Vision**

*Lord we are so thankful, You are the Almighty, You are the Sovereign God, You are the One who has been faithful to the Father and to His purpose down through the ages. Lord, You said, "I will build by church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Lord, we stand with You this morning as we come together, that You indeed will build Your church. And we sense that the final stones are being prepared to be put in place, and when that capstone is laid in place, it says, "Grace, grace unto it." Lord, we confess unto You this morning that it has been all Your grace of our history together through these years. Lord, I ask to stand under the anointing of the Holy Spirit as we share that we not receive a creed or doctrine to follow, but a life to be lived for You. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

I want to share on a little bit of our history in the early days of the assembly here in Richmond and the vision the Lord gave to us. Now by vision I do not mean that we received a heavenly vision like the Apostle Paul did on the Damascus road, but we did receive revelation through the Holy Spirit in those early days. As we are considering going into the book, "Why do we So Gather" in a couple of weeks, I wanted to share a little of that history to help you see that the vision was not just something to be held onto in an intellectual way, but it was something to experience, which we certainly did. So I hope that the Holy Spirit can really move today and bring life to what is shared.

I remember this song which is one of my favorites, "Precious memories, how they linger, how they flood my soul. These precious memories, how they linger, the sacred past unfolds." It is a sacred past because it was all of the Lord who raised us up. So this morning we just desire to share this vision together.

First of all, I want to say that it was a sovereign act of God of what He did in those early days. I remember just a little history, which included myself and Kenny and a few others who were with us and what happened in those days.

Do you all remember the big event that happened in 1969? Apollo II landed on the moon. I was in Marietta, Georgia, and I was working for Lockheed Aircraft. We were developing a cargo airplane, the C5A, and I was on the flight team. But in 1969 once the moon shot was over, the bottom dropped out of the aerospace industry. At that time they had just finished developing the Boeing 727, and we were finishing up the C5A, and we had made it to the moon. So the aircraft industry did not have much of a future at that time, and I was laid off along with 3,000 other engineers that were at Lockheed Aircraft.

At that time it was pretty difficult for me because we had one son while we were there in 1967, but my wife was pregnant with our second child, and I did not have a job. I still had a mortgage but no job. Anyway, that was the sovereign hand of God in my life. Delta Airlines is based in Atlanta, GA, so I went to Delta and applied for a job in their maintenance division, and actually I was offered the job when I interviewed. I said to the man and this was God's mercy: "You know, I need three days to pray about this." They offered me the job, and I did not have

one, but I prayed for three days, and nothing seemed to come up So I called the man back and said, "You know, I would like to take the job." And he said, "Well, something happened; the next person that we interviewed after you had done this exact job before. He was better qualified, and we hired him." What could I say? It was a bitter loss.

Nevertheless, I really felt a strong inclination to go back to Richmond Va. which is my wife's hometown, but more than that, I had a very special mother-in-law. She loved the Lord dearly, and by the way, she knew Mary Ann Mize who was instrumental in the Lord raising up an assembly in Richmond. She had read the "Normal Christian Life" and she sent it to me to read, and I have to say that it altered my life; no doubt about it.

I called my mother-in-law and said, "We are coming back to Richmond, and we need to find a place to stay." They had an apartment with two units in it, and they said, "One of the units just became available, and you can stay there. Needless to say, I was so grateful. Not only was it rent free, she also fed us which was really nice. But for four months I could not find a job, and finally I got a job at the City of Richmond. That turned out to be very important, and that had a story of its own, but it would take too much time now to share.

When I came back to Richmond, my dear brother Kenny Pittman, who was not a brother at that time, he was not a Christian, and my other brother, Michael Woods was still in Ohio. Sovereignly the Lord would bring us three brothers together and unite us with these sisters in Richmond. But I just want to say that God is sovereign, and I am thankful that we can have faith in His sovereignty even when things do not seem to be going our way.

I first met Kenny, my brother, in the summer of 1971. He was an engineering student and was working for the summer with the City of Richmond. He happened to be on the same floor where I was, and one day I saw him with his long blond hair. When I saw him there, I started talking to him about the Lord, and he was not very receptive. I asked him a very specific question: "Do you believe in the Bible, the Word of God?" He said, "No, it was just written by men." I said, "Okay," and I went back to my workplace. The next summer in 1972, once again I was walking around, and I heard Kenny talking to somebody about the Lord. I said, "Wow, this guy has had quite a transformation." I went up to him and began to talk to him, and I said, "By the way, do you believe in the Bible?" He grabbed me and said, "Every word is God-breathed." And I said, "Hallelujah, this man has really come to the Lord Jesus."

Kenny had been caught up in the Charismatic movement, and praise the Lord for that movement! Four months earlier in February of 1972 Kenny had come to the Lord through an Assembly of God Church down in the Fan District, and brothers and sisters, he was on fire for the Lord. Now I have to thank the Lord in all of His grace and mercy, Kenny is still on fire for the Lord, and I am so grateful for that.

At the time I was in a fundamental Baptist Church, and for those who are not familiar with the Fundamental Baptists, I guess the best word to describe it is that we were legalistic. That was our approach to the Bible, and that has a long story also, but I cannot share it today. Kenny was a brand-new believer, just four months, when I met him. We began to fellowship together although we had different backgrounds. Of course, in the Assembly of God they believed in the

gifts of the Spirit and practiced them. You may not know this but Kenny was speaking in tongues, and that was quite new to me. Also, it did not fit into my doctrine because I had been taught that the gifts had disappeared along with the apostles. When they passed away all the gifts had passed away. Of course, that is not true, and I was discovering very quickly that was not true because of my brother Kenny. He was so full of the life of the Lord, which really attracted me to him, and we began to share with one another. We would bring our lunch, go across from city hall to the Capital Park, and we would share the Lord together. We did not share around doctrines; we shared Christ with one another. We would just fellowship together in Christ.

It was a living experience of Ephesians 4:3: “Endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace until we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.”

That is a lesson we learned. It became part of the vision that the Lord was revealing to us of this matter of keeping the unity of the faith. We already have unity; we already have oneness in Christ, and we should gather in that way. One day, praise the Lord, believe it or not, all the believers in Christ will come to the unity of the faith, the unity of what we believe and what we know to be true in the Word of God.

During that time I suggested to Kenny that we go through “The Normal Christian Life” together because it had meant so much to me and it was recently that I had read it. So we began to read it. I do not remember how many days or weeks it was before Kenny came to me and once again laid hold of me and said, “Jerry, Christianity is Christ, isn’t it? It is just Christ. It is not me, it is not I, but it is Christ.” What he saw was the centrality of Christ in God’s heart. He saw that Christianity was not a bunch of rules to follow, but it was Christ Himself. He was just taken away with that vision of Jesus Christ, and it affected me deeply as well. But I was able to begin to see things a little bit differently concerning the Lord because I was one who was following the rules thinking it was the way to live the Christian life, which is far from the truth. We live the Christian life by the life of Christ, and that is the only way we can really live it.

We were beginning to see this matter of the centrality of Christ in our lives. Romans 11:36 says, “For from Him, through Him, and to Him are all things, to whom be the glory forever. Amen.”

We were coming into that truth together, and it was a precious time. As I read that book, I began to see that the church was to be a living expression of Christ. Now, I was not very clear at that point in time, but I began to say, “There is something about the church that is different from what I had been experiencing.” The Lord was opening our eyes to see that the purpose of the church was to be an expression of Christ. In fact, in Ephesians 1:22-23 the Lord is very clear. “The church which is His body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all.”

So the Lord was beginning to bring this vision to us of what the church is—Christ the Head and Christ the Body. All of this was going on at that time, and then my mother-in-law passed away at the age of fifty about a year after we got back to Richmond. It had a deep impact on my life because she was such a precious sister in the Lord and the one who introduced me to some of these Watchman Nee books. These books actually came from Mary Ann Mize who had given them to my mother-in-law. Mary Ann had told my mother-in-law about a brother from China who was coming to Richmond to speak, and my mother-in-law had mentioned that to me. So I

suggested to Kenny that we go to hear him. And I remember it was so funny, and I said, "I wonder if this guy knew Watchman Nee," and of course you all know that he did. Anyway, I kind of said it in a laughing way, and thank the Lord it was true.

But at this point in my life personally the Lord began to deal with me on this matter of the church, and I had this very real question in my heart: "What is the church?" The Lord was really dealing with me on this, and He put that question in my heart. It was not one that I just came up with, and it was reinforced because of what was going on in that little Baptist Church that I was among. They had caught one of the teachers smoking, and you could not do that. There was a lot of things that we could not do. I remember there was a lot of discussion going on and things of that nature. Finally, they came up with what they called a covenant that all of the teachers were to sign. I was teaching Sunday School at the time so that included me. There was a lot in it that you would all agree with. You had to believe in the virgin birth, you had to believe that Christ was the Son of God, you had to believe in most of the fundamental things, but you also had to be a premillennialist which my views have changed a little bit on that. Then we had the other requirements: you could not dance, you could not go to movies, you could not smoke, those kind of things; it was very legalistic.

They came to me during this period and said, "Jerry, we want you to sign this covenant in order to teach." I read it, and as I looked at it, I could not sign it. The Lord had been really working on me, and He would not let me sign it. They went through the whole list with me. Do you believe in this? Do you believe in that? Do you do this, do that? I said that I do go to movies occasionally, and they said, "Well, are they good movies?" I said, "Yes, they are good movies." At that time we did not have a rating system." They said, "That is okay, but just sign this." I said, "You know, I cannot." And this is what came to me, "We have one covenant as Christians, signed in the blood of Jesus Christ. That is the only covenant that we need as Christians. We do not need any other covenant." They just looked at me and shook their head and said, "Jerry, you will not be able to teach anymore." And I said, "That is okay, but I cannot sign that covenant."

Eventually the Lord told me to come out of that Baptist Church. That is what I was dealing with at time. I was struggling with what is the church. And actually my view of the church at that time was that it was a human organization. It was organized to get the word of the Gospel out, which is not a bad thing, but that is the way I saw it. It was just an organization that men had come up with to get the Word of God out and spread evangelism throughout the world. We also emphasized understanding the biblical doctrines and being able to defend those doctrines. That was my background, and I was really churning in my spirit over this matter of what is the church.

On October 1, 1972 we went to hear our brother Stephen Kaung, and his first message was on Acts 1, the birth of the church. Wow! the church being born was a new concept to me which I had never heard before. It was a sovereign move of God in my life to bring me to that meeting and to hear that message. The very first ministry was dealing with the question that was in my heart. And he shared that the church was living, that it was born on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon 120 individual believers, and they became one body under the Headship of Christ. That was revolutionary. Then he said this: "The church is not an organization but an organism." Now when he said that, I have to say that the heavens did open.

I did not see a physical vision, but the Lord just opened my eyes and I said, “Lord, how amazing is the body of Jesus Christ! How amazing is Your plan and sovereign way of working, and I was just flabbergasted. I was never the same after that. I looked at Christ differently; I looked at the church differently, and I was just amazed.

I began to realize that Christ is the Head of the church, not the pastor. We had been taught that the pastor was the head of the church, but now I knew the Lord was the Head of the church. We were not an organization but the body of Jesus Christ, and we were run by Him. We were under the authority and power of the Head of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ, not man. And this was a revolution in my life.

Kenny was also with me at that time, and it also opened Kenny’s eyes to see not only Christ, the Head, but Christ the body. It was an amazing time; it was as joyous as when I first came to the Lord at twelve years old. Kenny had just come to the Lord at twenty years old, and at that time I was twenty-eight when I met Kenny. All of this was stirring in my heart, Kenny’s heart, and Michael Woods’ heart who had been drummed out of the place he had been attending in Ohio; and the Lord was going to bring us together.

These meetings where Stephen was speaking were in the garage of Llewellyn Miller’s house. What I did not realize was that there was a number of sisters meeting there that had been praying for the Lord to raise up something for His own purpose in Richmond. They had been praying for five years—travail before birth. The Lord was going to do something, but there had to be travailing prayer for it to happen, and these sisters took up that ministry. It was Llewellyn Miller, Elsie Prince, Ray Walker, Mary Ann Mize, and Eugertha Woods. There were a few other sisters there also, but these were the main ones who took up this burden.

A number of them had attended a camp at Wabanna in Maryland where Brother Sparks was speaking which was either 1966-67. Brother Sparks, Stephen Kaung and Devern Fromke were speaking. They came away from that time, and I remember Llewellyn saying, “I was shattered upon the Rock. I just saw the Lord in a new way, and I saw what He wanted. They began to pray that the Lord would raise up something for Himself in Richmond.

The only way I can describe these precious sisters is that their spirits were hungry and thirsty. The Lord said, “If you are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, you will be filled.” And I really think that was their heart. They were so hungry and thirsty for the Lord Himself. Two things happened while they were praying. One is that they got hold of a book, “The Ultimate Intention” by Devern Fromke. It opened their eyes up to God’s eternal purpose and to what God is trying to do. One of the main things I remember about the book is that he said, “This redemptive work, this great work of salvation was really not God’s heart in the beginning. He did not create man to fall and sin. He did not want him to, but He knew it would happen, so this work of redemption was a remedial work to bring us back to the place where we can go on with the Lord and be brought unto glory and serving the Lord’s purpose.

The other thing was a poem by A. B. Simpson, and it is called “Himself” and if you will bear with me I want to read that poem because it really shows us the heart that was in these sisters.

You have to remember they too were fairly charismatic, and they had experienced a lot of things such as the gifts and the Spirit and all of that. This is what this poem says.

“Once it was the blessing, now it is the Lord.

Once it was the feeling, now it is His Word.

Once His gifts I wanted, now the Giver own.

Once I sought for healing, now for Himself alone.

Once it was painful trying, now it is perfect trust.

Once a half salvation, now the uttermost.

Once was ceaseless holding, now He holds me fast.

Once was constant drifting, now my anchor is cast.

Once was busy planning, now it is trustful prayer.

Once was anxious caring, now He has the care.

Once was what I wanted, now it is what Jesus says.

Once it was constant asking, now ceaseless praise.

Once it was my working, His it hence shall be.

Once I tried to use Him, now He uses me.

Once the power I wanted, now the Mighty One.

Once for self I labored, now for Him alone.

Once I hoped in Jesus, now I know He is mine.

Once my lamps were dying, now they brightly shine.

Once for death I waited, now His coming, Hail.

And my hopes are anchored safe within the veil.

That deeply affected these sisters, and that was their passion. That became their passion to satisfy the Lord’s heart, whatever that meant. I would remind us all that we never lose the passion for our Lord Jesus. It was amazing the Spirit that was amongst these sisters as we encountered them in those early days.

Brother Stephen Kaung, our faithful brother, would come once a month, even during those five years. He would share on a Friday night, Sunday afternoon and Monday morning with these few sisters. In the beginning he would fly in from New York, and I said to him once, “Brother, you have been flying in to be with these few sisters for five years, and nothing seems to be happening.” And I said, “Why did you continue to come?” He looked at me and said, “Jerry,

because the Lord told me to.” How profound! “The Lord told me to.” My brother was so dear and humble before the Lord. To him that was his way of life: “The Lord told me to.”

They had travailed for five years that the Lord would raise up something for Himself, for His own pleasure in Richmond. It kind of reminded me of Samuel’s mother, Hannah, and how she prayed and travailed for all those years. She was barren, and she kept asking God for a son. They would go up to Jerusalem once a year and she would always have a prayer asking for a son. As you continue to read the story you will see that Hannah’s prayer changed from asking for a son to saying, “Lord, if you will give me a son, I will give him to you.” In other words, her prayer changed to, “Lord, it is not my need, but it is what You need that matters, and You need this child.” She offered him to the Lord, and she was very faithful. When he was around three or four years old, she took him up to the temple and gave Him up to the Lord to serve in his house. That was an amazing thing for a mother who had waited all those years to have a child. But it was travail; that is the point I want to make. She travailed, and these sisters were travailing that the Lord’s need would be met. These prayers of the sisters were birth pains to bring forth the birth of the assembly in Richmond.

Brothers and sisters, this assembly was not organized by the sisters nor us brothers; it was birthed by the Holy Spirit. It was a sovereign work, which was a combination of these sisters praying, Stephen sharing, and eventually us brothers coming in.

The sisters had been considering what it meant to be a testimony for the Lord rather than just meeting together the way they were. And this Scripture came to Llewellyn Miller from Isaiah 37:3: “Lord, the children have come to birth and there is not strength to bring forth.” That was her prayer, and they began to pray for some brothers to come in. These sisters were getting together on Sunday afternoon for a time of worship and listening to some messages, but they knew that the Lord was after more than that. And they actually began to pray that the Lord would bring brothers into their midst with the same burden that they had. Of course, they were expecting some mature men, probably forty or fifty years old, but that is not what they got. They were very surprised.

In August of 1972 Michael Woods showed up from Ohio. The reason he came was to attend Randolph Macon College in Ashland, Va. He had a Brethren background, and my dear brother was actually drummed out of the group he was meeting with.. It was a traumatic time for our brother, and he was really seeking the Lord and what He wanted. In August of 1972 he went to the meeting at Llewellyn Miller house and heard Brother Stephen speak. He later testified to me: “Jerry, the first time I heard that brother, I knew that I was at home.” That is quite a testimony to the sovereign work of God.

Two months later, in October of 1972, Kenny and I showed up. Of course, Kenny’s background was Assembly of God, and mine was hard-shell Baptist. And thank the Lord, we are still here fifty years later. Praise the Lord for His work and mercy. But we were all in our twenties. I was twenty-eight, I think Kenny was twenty, and Mike was in between us in age. The sisters were expecting very mature brothers, but they did not get very mature brothers; instead they got very young brothers. But we continued to meet together. We would go when Stephen came

to minister and listen to him. Also, we began meeting with them on Sunday afternoon at 3:00 just for a time of worship and prayer.

In those months we began to see more and more the spiritual principles on which the body of Christ was to be founded and would operate. About six months later in March 1973, Stephen proposed that maybe we should have a conference, and of course the sisters were quite excited about that. The purpose was to help us in understanding God's eternal purpose and the functioning of the body of Christ, and what it meant to be a testimony to Jesus. We all agreed that that would be good to do, but I have to say the burden was mostly with these older sisters. They took it up in prayer, and we prayed with them, but they were really the prayer warriors. The first conference was at Roslyn in September 1973, and we called it the Richmond Fellowship Conference at that time. It was adults only, and seventy adults were there. We had invited brothers and sisters from other assemblies that the Lord was raising up at that time, and some of them attended.

Stephen spoke on the testimony of Jesus; that was his heart. He wanted to be clear that we understood what that meant. And we were much helped at that conference. It was a powerful word on the Testimony of Jesus. You can listen to it at some time on the CTM website. At the end of that conference we decided that we would have another one in June of 1974 nine months later.

In the early spring of 1974, Brother Kaung asked us: "Should we consider becoming a corporate testimony to function as His body, to be His house? We began to consider it. He said that it is something you have to be very serious about; it is not something to take up lightly, and we needed to pray much about it. And we did. The issue was this: were we satisfied with just listening to his ministries once a month and then gathering for a time of worship in the afternoon on Sunday? For a while I still went to the Baptist Church, and I would come on Sunday afternoon. In fact, most people were doing that who were coming to those times.

Did we want to just be satisfied with that, just pleasing ourselves? It was a wonderful time. I had never experienced open worship in my past history, and it was marvelous. I appreciated it because I knew what it was like to come together and really not worship.

Were we going to serve His purpose or ours? That is what it boiled down to. During that time we learned about being the body of Christ, being a dwelling place for the Lord, a house where he was pleased to dwell. It was all part of God's eternal purpose which I had never heard of before. I did not even know that God had an eternal purpose. I just thought His purpose was to save people and fill up heaven, and that is far from the truth, of course. But that is where I was.

We decided that if we were not going to meet to serve God's purpose, why should we meet at all other than to please ourselves? There were a lot of good Bible studies out there. Our times were wonderful together. There were many places where saints loved the Lord and taught the Word. So what is His purpose? What was the right ground? What is the scriptural ground on which we should meet? We did not want to just become another division. The church is so divided today, and we know that the Lord's prayer in John 17 was that they might be one as We are One.



We wanted that same Spirit in our midst that we were one with all our brothers and sisters and not divided.

### **What is God's Eternal Purpose**

What is His eternal purpose? We have heard a lot about that over the years, but what is it? Ephesians 1:9-10 make it very clear. The purpose is for His Son. It said, "Having made known the mystery of His will, (and the mystery of God is Jesus Christ) according to the pleasure which He purposed in Himself for the administration of the fulness of time to head up all things in Christ, things both in heaven and in earth."

The eternal purpose for God's Son is that He wants His Son to be Head of everything, all things.

Colossians 1:18: "And He is the Head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead that in all things He might have first place."

God's heart is that His Son might have first place. First place in every individual, first place in His church.

### **God's Eternal Purpose for His People**

The second part of God's eternal purpose is His eternal purpose for His people. What was that? That is in Ephesians 1:22-23: "He has put all things under His feet and has given Him to be Head over all things to the church which is His body." It does not say "which is like a body;" it says, "which is His body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all."

In other words, to be an expression of Christ, not only individually but corporately as His body is to express Christ. That is His eternal purpose. God is very clear about His purpose. His Son is to be the administrative Head of everything in all of heaven and earth. It has to be first accomplished in His church, in His people; your Head, my Head, the Head of the church, the body. The Son is to have first place. If we do not want Christ to be first in our lives, why are you gathering together anyway? We gather together to share what we know of Christ with one another. And if you are not really interested in Him being first place, how much are you going to learn of Christ? It is very important. This is God's eternal purpose that He have first place in Your life and in the life of His body.

We were beginning to learn what it meant to be a testimony of Jesus. All things must begin with Him, come from Him, and be for Him. Being a testimony meant that Christ would be all things to us, that He would be Head of all things to the assembly, that He would have first place individually and corporately. The testimony meant we were to be His spiritual organic body. That was our calling. We were to be a vessel full of the life of Christ, manifesting His life not only among ourselves but even to the world. And we were to be not only a vessel full of life but an instrument of service for our Lord Jesus in whatever He called us to particularly in the matter of prayer and serving Him, to be the priesthood. That was our calling. Being a testimony meant that we gathered only unto His name, and this was very important for us in those early days. It actually comes from the Scripture in Matthew 18:20, and this is the Lord's description or His explanation

of the church. It is very fundamental yet very simple. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Christ in our midst makes us His body; it is two or three who gather together in my name. It does not say 200 or 300; it does not say 2000 or 3,000; it just says two or three who will gather in my name. So gathering unto His name is extremely important. It was so important to us.

You know in the early church they just met together; there was no division. Everybody would come together in the unity of the spirit on Solomon's porch. They would also meet in houses. In fact, they were so in love with the Lord, some of them would meet every day and break bread together. It was an amazing time. There was no division; they were all one in Christ. They met unto Him and Him alone.

### **Division Comes Into the Church**

But twenty-eight years later, something happened in the Corinthian Church; they were beginning to divide. Paul said, "I hear that some say that I am of Paul, others were of Apollos, and some said they were of Cephas, and others said, 'I am of Christ.'" Essentially, they were meeting around the spiritual men of their time instead of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was subtle, but that is what they were doing. Even the ones that used the technically correct name, "We are of Christ," were saying, "We are different from you all. We are of Christ, and we are separated from you." So each of those groups were in a sense defining themselves in such a way that it was separating them from one another and being able to fellowship with one another.

In that first Corinthian letter, Paul was responding to a letter that they had sent him having questions about the church and its functions. They did not mention anything about what was going on of this nature. He had just heard about it through a dear brother, and he addressed that first. It was the most important thing in Paul's heart that they not become divided. He told them: "Is Christ divided? Is Christ divided into different divisions? Of course not; neither can His body be divided because it is Christ. His body is of Christ; it cannot be divided."

Brothers and sisters, the Corinthians did respond, and we are thankful that it was corrected. But we know that today the same error has come into the church world-wide. There are so many different divisions in God's church. We did not want to be a division; we wanted to gather in a way that would not divide us or define us in such a way that we were separate from our other brothers and sisters. Yes, they may be in denominations, but they are our brothers and sisters. We belong to them, and they belong to us. If they come into our midst, we will not reject them because they say they are of another denomination. We receive them because we love them, and they are ours, and we are one in Jesus Christ.

As precious as Martin Luther is, and of course he certainly had some problems, but he never really desired that they would eventually form a church called the Lutherans which was centered around Luther and his teachings. The same way with Presbyterians. Presbyters mean "elders functioning." They saw that there were elders in the church, and they needed to function. So they began to define themselves in that way, that we are a church that functions with elders. We do not gather in the name of Presbyterians; we just gather in the name of Christ. It is the same thing with Baptists of which I used to be a part of. And there is the Holiness Church. These are

great teachings, correct teachings, but we do not gather as Baptists. We do not define ourselves as ones who believe in baptism. Yes, we do, but that is not why we gather. We learned that meeting under other names, defining ourselves in different ways actually divides the body of Christ.

Philippian 2:9-10 says, "God has highly exalted Him and given Him a name which is above every name, the name of Jesus. Every knee shall bow, things in heaven and earth." That is the only name we have; it is above all names. His name has all the authority and power. That is why we pray in His name because we are unto His name. We are unto Him and meet and gather in His name. There is no other name under heaven or earth in which we should gather. We do welcome all brothers and sisters into our midst. They may have other beliefs than we do, but that is no reason to reject them. They are our brothers and sisters. We do not have a membership role. You are enrolled when you accept Jesus Christ. You are put on the role in heaven, the book of life. That is where your name is, and that is where it really counts. But you do not join a church; you are born into it. When you accept Jesus Christ, you come into the body of Jesus Christ whether you realize it or not. So you are born into it.

I remember Stephen said something that was so profound to me. He said, "Whom Christ has received, we receive." We cannot reject other brothers and sisters.

### **The Spiritual Ground We Meet on**

So what is the spiritual ground that we meet on? I have already mentioned it. Ephesians 4:3, 6: "Endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit," (That is the ground on which we meet.) until we all come to the unity of the faith."

In other words, what that is saying is you do not get together and agree on which doctrines you believe in and say, "Okay, that is our statement of faith and all of those who have that statement of faith can gather with us." No! Absolutely not!" You keep the unity of the spirit. You are a brother and sister in Christ, and we fellowship with one another.

I do go to the gym occasionally even though these knees are killing me, and I met a brother there. You remember that shirt I wore that says, "Normal is not coming back; Jesus is." I wore it one time to the gym, and he saw it. He came over to me and said, "Man, I like that shirt." So we started fellowshiping about the Lord. Now he is a pastor, and he sent me some of his sermons, which were very good, by the way. So we fellowship around the Lord when we do get together at the gym. He never really asked me what kind of Christian I was, and I think that was marvelous.

Most of the time, particularly in the early days, in fact I had this happen at Chic-fil-a one day. I was sitting there with my Bible, and a man came up. I think he was from India, and he looked at me and said, "What kind of Christian are you? I see you have a Bible." I said, "I am a Christian." He said, "Well, I see you have a Bible, but what kind of Christian are you?" I said, "Look, I am just a Christian. I love the Lord, and if you love the Lord we are brothers in Christ." He said, "What denomination are you?" I said, "I am just a Christian; I do not belong to a denomination, and he said, "Oh, I have it figured out; you are nondenominational." I said, "I am not nondenominational; I am just a Christian. If you want to fellowship about the Lord, we can. And he said, "Well, I am Catholic." I said, "That is okay; we can still fellowship about Christ." Finally, he just looked a little

frustrated, and I had to get up and leave. But that is the way people view this, and we need to be very clear on what is the basis on which we meet. So these are some of the very fundamental things.

*Lord, we do come to You today. You are so marvelous, I get excited when I remember the early days and all the marvelous things You were showing us. It was like eating honey, Lord, it was just so great. We thank You particularly for my dear precious sisters who stood faithful, praying and standing those five years together, and continued to stand and pray as we began to meet as an assembly. I thank you for my dear precious brother Stephen. He was a vessel that You raised up. I know he wants no glory, and I will not give it to him, but I will give it to You. Lord, You raised up this vessel who had such an impact on sharing the Lord's eternal purpose and Your vision for Your Son and Your church. We are thankful for that vessel, and we pray that the things that He has shown us we can carry on. Lord, I thank You also for Your sovereign work of bringing brothers and sisters together with a heart that might fulfil Your own heart, a desire just to please the Lord and not ourselves. Lord, we thank You for that. I thank You for Your faithfulness more than anything and Your grace, that amazing grace that has made all of this happen. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*